

Insulating the Education Pipeline to Increase Postsecondary Success

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Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26 Issue Briefs

This is the first in a series of issue briefs focused on postsecondary success, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Forum for Youth Investment has challenged leaders across the country to ensure all young people are “Ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life.” Embedded in the challenge are several key ideas: 1) readiness requires investments in youth from birth into the early twenties, 2) readiness should be measured broadly, with indicators that go beyond high school graduation, and 3) readiness is influenced by a broad range of systems and settings.

Being ready is important, but “ready” is not the same as “successful.” Ensuring young people are ready for next steps after high school is critical, but we also need to make sure they don’t stumble before getting to the finish line.

Through the *Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26* series and our ongoing support to teams of community leaders across the country, we are working to mobilize and coordinate multiple sectors – education, business, government, nonprofits, communities and families – to increase postsecondary completion and ensure successful transitions for all youth.

The path to adulthood is rapidly changing for youth across the United States. The “traditional” sequence of graduating from high school, going to college, getting a job, getting married, and starting a family is more myth than reality. Over the past 50 years, the transition to adulthood has become longer, more complex and less orderly, increasing the need for well-designed, intentional structures that support young people in their efforts to learn, grow and become economically independent.¹ Despite the changing reality of the transition to adulthood, conversations about student success still tend to focus largely on reducing the high school dropout crisis.

If we want to ensure successful transitions, supports cannot end when students leave high school, either as graduates or dropouts. Ensuring adult success requires broadening our thinking – beyond the classroom, beyond the school day, beyond academics and beyond the age of 18. Given dramatic changes in the labor and wage market in the United States, it also requires thinking beyond high school graduation and beyond college readiness as the end goals.

In this introductory brief we explore why postsecondary completion is an important goal and look at how we – both our young people and our institutions – are currently faring toward that goal. We then introduce an analogy, the “insulated education pipeline,” to describe the kinds of partners that need to be mobilized and policy approaches that need to be enacted in order to significantly increase completion rates and help more young people successfully transition to adulthood.

The Case for Postsecondary Completion

Completion of some postsecondary credential is an increasingly critical milestone along the pathway to a successful adulthood. Labor market projections suggest that by 2018, about two-thirds of all jobs will require at least some postsecondary education.² In addition to being key to earning a family-sustaining wage, postsecondary education provides opportunities to develop important knowledge, skills and habits of mind; increases lifetime earning capacity; and is associated with better life outcomes overall. Some highlights from the research follow.

- **Postsecondary completion has clear workforce and economic implications.** In 2008, the median earnings of young adults with a high school diploma or equivalent were \$30,000 annually, compared to \$46,000 for those with a bachelor’s degree and \$36,000 for those with an associate’s degree.³ Over the course of a lifetime, college graduates earn roughly one million dollars more than peers with only a high school diploma. People with a postsecondary credential of some kind are also more likely to have access to other forms of compensation such as health insurance and retirement benefits.⁴ Entry level workers with postsecondary credentials possess more of the skills employers believe are important in the workplace than their peers with only high school diplomas.⁵

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- **Postsecondary education is associated with better life outcomes.** As the biggest predictor of upward mobility for an individual and their children, postsecondary education appears to be critical to breaking the cycle of poverty.⁶ In this way, it influences every facet of a person’s life. Higher levels of education correlate with better health outcomes and higher rates of civic engagement, from voting to volunteering. Family educational attainment is more predictive of children’s futures than race, health, and family assets. Children of educated parents tend to pursue higher levels of education, be healthier, be better prepared for school, and engage in more extracurricular activities.⁷
- **Young people themselves, regardless of race and class, consider higher education essential to career advancement and economic security.** A Public Agenda survey of high school students’ hopes and aspirations showed that 8 in 10 believe a college degree increases societal standing and 9 in 10 think a college degree is crucial for career advancement. Furthermore, young people are attempting to put their beliefs into action, with 75 percent of high school graduates pursuing some form of postsecondary education within two years of graduation.⁸

The Current Reality

These facts beg the question: If postsecondary success is such an important goal, how are we doing?

The answer: Not very well. In fact, for the first time in the 21st century, the current generation of college-aged youth will be less educated than their parents.⁹ While college access rates have increased significantly

in the past several years, completion rates have declined.¹⁰ And while most high school graduates now try to obtain some postsecondary education, far too many fail to complete a degree. Those who fail are disproportionately poor and minority youth. Though the lack of a common measure of completion makes this a complicated story to tell, here are a few troubling statistics related to completion:

- Only one-fifth of students who begin at community college graduate with an associate's degree within three years.¹¹
- Just 57% of students who enroll in bachelor's degree programs graduate within six years.¹²
- While 35 percent of white 25-29 year olds have a bachelor's degree, only 19 percent of African Americans and 11 percent of Latinos do.¹³
- While over 7 in 10 young people from high income families earn a bachelor's degree by age 24, only 1 in 10 of their low income peers do so.¹⁴

There are many reasons why so few young people successfully acquire postsecondary credentials. Rising tuition costs and limited access to financial aid and other supports for students who want to attend is a major factor. But behind the postsecondary completion gap is also a dramatic preparation gap. High school dropout rates are rising in most states,¹⁵ and too few young people who graduate from high school are well-equipped for college.

- *Young people do not feel prepared to pursue higher education or enter the workforce.*

According to a recent survey by Achieve, Inc., 39 percent of public high school graduates feel they do not have adequate mastery of skills and abilities expected by employers and/or higher education institutions. Whether in college or in the workforce, 86 percent feel they have some gaps in crucial skill areas. Thirty-five percent of college students and 39 percent of students in the workforce believe they have large gaps in preparation in at least one crucial skill area.¹⁶

Furthermore, only 35 percent of high school students strongly believe they can find ways around any problem that might arise in life.¹⁷

- *Higher education institutions feel young people are not adequately prepared when they enter.* The Achieve Inc. poll also revealed postsecondary instructors believe 42 percent of their students are not adequately prepared. Furthermore, 70 percent report spending some class time reviewing high school materials and skills and 24 percent report spending significant class time on these skills.¹⁸ According to the National Education Longitudinal Study, three out of five community college freshmen have to take at least one remedial class, and fewer than 25 percent of those students earn a degree within eight years.¹⁹

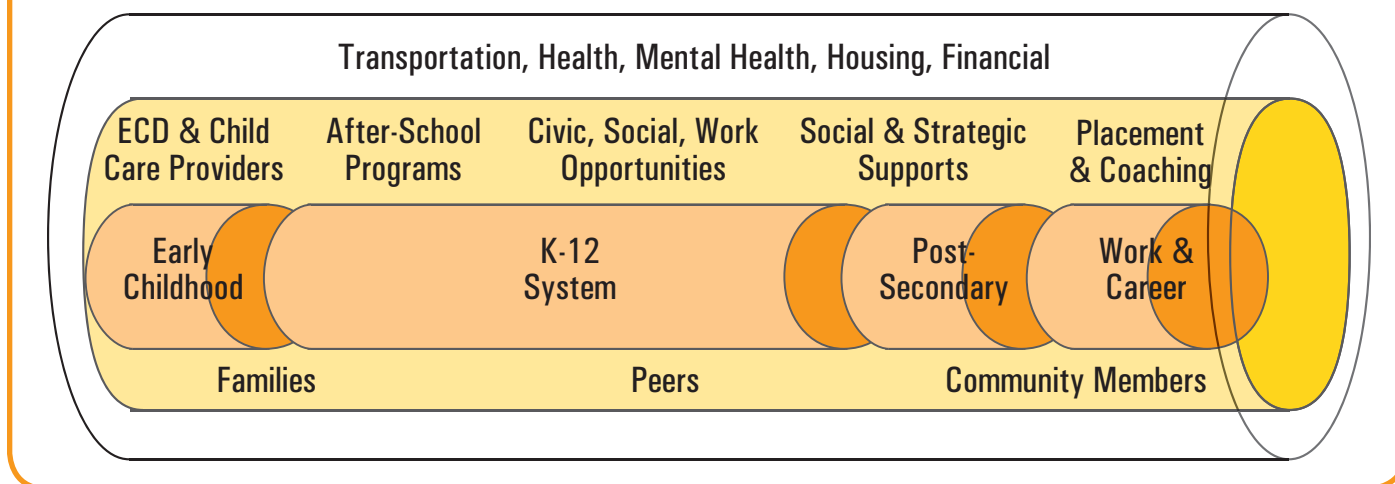
...behind the postsecondary completion gap is also a dramatic preparation gap.

Graduating students don't feel well prepared, higher education institutions don't think students are well prepared, and high school dropout rates are rising. Clearly there is work to be done to strengthen K-12 education and increase linkages between K-12 and postsecondary systems. But the preparation gap extends well beyond academics. As a result, increasing student success – in both K-12 and postsecondary education – is going to take an all-hands-on-deck approach.

Insulating the Education Pipeline

The high school and postsecondary dropout rates discussed above clearly signal a need to tighten the joints in the education pipeline (the links between pre-K and elementary, middle school and high school, high school and postsecondary), and to reduce the corrosion inside the pipe to increase the flow of students (e.g. increase the number of 9th graders

The Insulated Education Pipeline



who graduate in four years). However, if we are to take postsecondary success seriously as a goal, and if we want to ensure a successful transition to adulthood for all, we must do more than fix the leaks and increase the flow. We must insulate the education pipeline.²⁰

The outer layer of insulation should ensure young people have access to quality basic services that allow them to successfully make their way through the pipeline—things like health care, transportation, housing and financial supports. The inner layer of insulation includes family and peers, but also the range of formal and informal organizations that connect youth and their families to critical resources and broker between systems, and employers who provide opportunities for young people to apply their learning, pursue their interests and build social capital. Gaps in the availability of outer layer basic services create obvious barriers to postsecondary completion. Gaps in the inner layer are less visible but equally debilitating, especially for young people who lack a support system or need extra help (e.g. first time college goers, full-time workers, parents or care givers). We created the education pipeline graphic to underscore the relationship between academic success, successful risk management and broader developmental competence.

Why is insulating the education pipeline critical to ensuring postsecondary success? Two reasons. First, because inadequate academic preparation, while a major factor driving low postsecondary completion rates, is not the only factor. Readiness for college, work and life is linked to one's ability to avoid or manage risky behaviors and cope with other circumstances that can derail progress. Readiness is also linked to the non-academic developmental competencies that employers and higher education institutions cite as critical. Addressing young people's academic challenges often involves helping them leverage non-academic assets and supports (e.g. motivation, social support) or address non-academic issues (e.g. mental health, access to child care or transportation).

Second, because supports directed at postsecondary students do not have to come solely from postsecondary institutions. Community-based nonprofits and intermediaries have long played key roles in ensuring school-age youth are competent,

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connected and contributing. These organizations can also play a direct role in the postsecondary success of older youth and young adults by addressing key social, financial and practical barriers to degree completion. They can do so by providing services directly or brokering relationships between individuals, organizations and institutions.

Social support and connections are critical for low-income students who are often the first in their family to attend college.²¹ Thousands of CBOs all over the country already foster positive relationships with vulnerable youth. Without much retooling, some of these organizations could maintain and extend those relationships with young people into and through the postsecondary experience. In addition to relationships and social supports, CBOs and other local service agencies can be mobilized to ensure youth receive other supports that help make postsecondary education feasible. These include basic services such as child care, health care, transportation, job placement, financial assistance and housing, along with practical information about accessing, financing, and navigating postsecondary opportunities.

Promising examples are emerging where CBOs like YouthBuild and intermediaries like the Youth Development Institute are partnering with higher education to play these kinds of roles. In future issues, we will explore these examples as well as efforts by national intermediaries like Jobs for the Future and the National Youth Employment Coalition to support emerging partnerships.

Practices that are fundamental to the youth development approach – high expectations, social support, engagement and sustained relationships – are critical to the college completion equation. While these principles can be and sometimes are integrated into the work of higher education institutions themselves, many other organizations already play these roles – formally and informally, independently and sometimes in partnership with postsecondary institutions. Flying largely under the radar of the current policy conversation about higher education, they represent a wealth of knowledge and capacity that can and should be mobilized in support of postsecondary success.

Policies that Insulate the Education Pipeline

Insulating the education pipeline requires engaging new players in the student success conversation and implementing a broad range of strategies that address academic and other developmental competencies. It also has implications for how we think about education policy. Over the past several years, states have dedicated significant time and effort to improving academic achievement. While some progress has occurred at the elementary and middle school levels, progress at the secondary and postsecondary levels remains flat.²²

Focusing on the older end of the pipeline, here are several approaches that can help ensure young people receive the necessary insulation supports to obtain a postsecondary credential and transition successfully to adulthood. Specific innovative policy approaches will be explored in greater depth in future issues of this series.

- ***Increase alignment between secondary and postsecondary education systems.***

Lack of alignment causes many young people, particularly low-income and minority students, to slip through cracks in the education pipeline. A first step is to align high school standards with college entrance requirements. Another is

to use coordinated assessments that support young people in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Finally, exposing students to college level work by expanding opportunities for dual enrollment is another important alignment opportunity.²³

- **Support collaboration and communication among colleges, state agencies, and across states.** According to results of the Achieving the Dream initiative, the creation of learning communities across the above entities fostered innovation, created a stronger voice in state policy planning, and increased resource allocation to support the implementation and expansion of promising efforts.²⁴
- **Restructure financial aid opportunities.** College costs continue to skyrocket while financial aid remains stagnant. A cornerstone of financial aid, the federal Pell Grant, covers roughly 35 percent of the cost of college. Federal, state and institutional aid has increasingly shifted from need-based to merit-based funding, making college unaffordable for some populations of young people.²⁵ Current aid programs are also skewed in favor of traditional, full-time students, despite the fact that working while attending college is now more common than not.
- **Increase systemic support for a broad range of postsecondary opportunities, including traditional four-year colleges, community colleges, and alternative credentialing programs.** Community colleges play a key role in expanding access to postsecondary education, especially for low-income and minority students. However, low completion rates point to the need to

Student success will not improve at scale until the education pipeline is both fixed and insulated.

expand services and restructure practices and policies at many institutions. Policy makers can support improvement by increasing support for practices that provide student-centered learning experiences, address key loss points (e.g. remedial or developmental education) and increase social and academic supports.

- **Improve and align data systems.** Fragmented data systems waste resources and let young people fall through the cracks. In addition to aligning K-12 and higher education data systems, some states and localities are also developing parallel systems in early childhood, child welfare, juvenile justice, workforce development and health. A coordinated system with information about the entire pipeline, including the insulation, would ensure attention is paid to the full range of goals we have for young people as they transition to adulthood.

Changing the Way We Do Business

Student success will not improve at scale until the education pipeline is both fixed and insulated. If implemented in isolation, many strategies to decrease high school dropout rates or increase postsecondary completion rates will likely be ineffective and may exacerbate rather than reduce fragmentation. The pipeline cannot be effectively insulated unless efforts are coordinated so that leaders can assess whether collectively, they add up to what is needed.

Therefore, changing the way leaders think and do business – individually and collectively – is key to success. Leaders must be willing to ask bigger questions that lead to better data, bolder strategies and broader partnerships. Leaders who are committed to improving the transition to adulthood and increasing postsecondary success need to be challenged to:

- Believe that large-scale changes are possible;
- Believe they have the capacity to do more by working together;

- Develop strong partnerships and coordinating structures to ensure their specific efforts add up to a coherent whole;
- Do ongoing (versus one-shot) planning, decision-making and priority setting; and
- Ask more complex questions and demand more precise answers.

The benefits of fixing and insulating the leaky pipeline are compelling, but the costs of not doing so may be even more so. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that the U.S. loses \$3.7 billion a year as a result of poorly prepared students (\$1.4 billion in remedial education for high school graduates and an estimated \$2.3 billion loss due to college drop-outs and reduced earning potential).²⁶

We must change the way we do business and put the necessary supports in place to ensure all young people experience a successful transition to adulthood. Future issue briefs in this series will feature promising, innovative steps that organizations, institutions, communities and states are taking toward this important goal.

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